

Exploring German Literature Teaching in Higher Education From the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics

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This paper examines the deficiencies of German literature teaching in higher education from the perspective of reception aesthetics, emphasizing student-centered design in teaching activities. Reception aesthetics, focusing on the reader, views interpretation as an integral part of the work itself. By applying concepts such as “horizon of expectations” and “invocation structure” in the classroom, we aim to stimulate students’ imagination and creativity, encouraging their active participation in learning. Using Goethe’s poetry as an example, this paper discusses teaching strategies and methods.

Keywords: reception aesthetics, German literature teaching, Goethe’s poetry

Development and Theoretical Connotation of Reception Aesthetics

Reception aesthetics originated in the 1960s at the University of Konstanz, Germany. Hans Robert Jauss’s 1967 lecture marked its beginning. Further developed by Wolfgang Iser and others, reception aesthetics is rooted in phenomenology and hermeneutics, emphasizing the role of reader reception. This theory quickly gained international attention. Traditionally, literary studies focused on the work and the author, often overlooking the reader. Reception aesthetics, however, values the reader’s role, proposing that interpretation varies with individuals and eras, forming a dynamic process.

The theory centers on the reader, emphasizing the primary role of the reader’s appreciation and critique, diverging from traditional literary theories that are work-centric. Reception aesthetics acknowledges the reader’s active role in reading, granting freedom for creative interpretation and proposing that a work’s meaning evolves with time and reader perception, remaining unfinished and dynamic. A reader’s reception is an act of re-creation; appreciation and critique contribute to a literary work’s realization. Jauss argued that literary history should investigate how works were received across historical periods, creating a history of a work’s reception. The “horizon of expectations”, a core concept of Jauss’s reception aesthetics, refers to how readers’ literary and life experiences shape their reading, described as “pre-structure” or the “horizon of aesthetic experience”. This preconceived framework guides understanding.

In terms of Jauss’s “horizon of aesthetic experience”, three primary aspects include:

1. Familiarity with literary genres and standards enables readers to discern and evaluate works based on inherent measures, which serve as a “pre-understanding” influencing reading.

2. Accumulated familiarity with literary history or contemporary works forms reading experiences that shape readers' perspectives and attitudes towards new works.

3. Readers' real-life experiences enter the reading horizon as a reference point. Readers often contrast the fictional world with real life, comparing literary language with everyday language.

Jauss believes the "horizon of aesthetic experience" encompasses readers' prior literary and life experiences. The "invocation structure", another core concept proposed by Wolfgang Iser, highlights how a literary text, as an unfinished, multi-layered structure, contains blanks and indeterminacies that readers complete, transforming the text into a work. This structure invites reader participation, with indeterminacies and blanks inspiring readers to creatively fill in and imagine, hence invoking readers to engage.

Current Situation of German Literature Teaching in Higher Education

Most students majoring in German at universities in China enter with no prior knowledge of the language. During their freshman and sophomore years, the introductory phase focuses on the basics: German letters, pronunciation, foundational grammar, and vocabulary. German literature courses are typically scheduled for junior or senior years, with some universities offering these as compulsory courses and others as electives. By the end of the foundational phase, students generally have a grasp of German grammar and can handle basic conversations. However, lacking a language-rich environment, students rarely read German literature or engage with German literary works outside the classroom. Additionally, given the competitive job market, upperclassmen are primarily focused on internships, job searches, or preparing for postgraduate exams and studying abroad. As a result, most students do not view studying German literature as particularly important. Varying levels of language proficiency, limited vocabulary, and other factors add to the challenges of accurately understanding and appreciating German literary works in class.

Taking German poetry analysis as an example, students must do more than simply comprehend the text; they must also consider the poetic context, the historical and social background of the time, and the poet's intent. Only by situating themselves within the context can they truly grasp the emotions and purposes expressed in the poem. Since students typically do not actively study German history, German philosophy, or similar areas, only a small number of literature enthusiasts engage actively in class, thinking critically and participating in discussions. Most students remain passive, receiving information from the teacher without active engagement. Due to cultural differences and limited background knowledge, German literary works often feel remote and fail to resonate with students.

Most instructors employ traditional teaching methods, directly delivering information about literary works to students and requiring rote memorization of key details about German literary history, authors, and works. This approach often lacks structured pedagogical design, fails to make comprehension easier for students, and does little to stimulate students' enthusiasm and motivation for self-directed learning. As a result, students tend to forget most German literature knowledge once they leave the classroom and stop actively using it.

The standardization of content in German literature courses further complicates the teaching approach. In current German literature instruction, standardized textbook explanations serve as the primary basis for both teachers' and students' understanding of German literature. This method stifles both teachers' and students' creativity and overlooks personalized interpretation and comprehension, severely limiting their independent thinking.

Significance and Pedagogical Exploration of Reception Aesthetics in German Literature Classrooms

Reception aesthetics emphasizes a reader-centered approach, viewing reading critique as re-creation. Applied to German literature classes in higher education, it promotes interest, subjectivity, personalized interpretation, and a broadened perspective. Teachers must shift their approach, designing student-centered activities, understanding students' needs, and fostering competency and innovation. This approach encourages the development of German literature materials, integrating theoretical insights beneficial for teachers and students alike. Currently, available materials are outdated and lack instructional design, calling for updates.

Exploring poetry teaching under reception aesthetics:

1. "Horizon of Expectations" in German poetry teaching: According to Jauss, the horizon of expectations is shaped by readers' interests, aesthetic experiences, and ideals, influencing their aesthetic demands. Teachers should understand students' proficiency levels, awakening their existing knowledge base and activating their horizon of expectations, thus easing comprehension and sparking interest. Pre-class tasks, such as researching German poetry backgrounds, can help teachers focus on the teaching core more efficiently.

2. "Invocation Structure" in German poetry teaching: Iser posits that indeterminate elements and blanks within texts stimulate imagination, offering readers freedom to interpret and engage with the text. German poetry's rhythmic beauty, rooted in linguistic flexibility and development, is rich with "blanks" that allow readers to freely imagine and interpret the poetic realm. Teachers should avoid rigid or authoritative interpretations, instead designing activities that encourage students to explore these "indeterminacies", interpret individually, and perceive nuances beyond the literal text.

3. Recitation teaching method: Poetry is a concise form of literature, short in length and often rhymed, making it suitable for recitation. Many classic German poems are set to music, enhancing their rhythm and memorability. For instance, Schubert's composition of "The Trout" by Schubart became widely known. Reciting German poetry allows students to relive the creative context, express emotions, and fuel their imagination. In-class, students should be encouraged to recite with musical accompaniment, discovering the beauty of poetry and melody. After class, hosting recitation contests or events can create a positive learning atmosphere and inspire enthusiasm.

Teaching Design of Goethe's Poetry in German Literature Courses From the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics

German poetry occupies a pivotal position in German literature courses, possessing unique artistic appeal in both linguistic art and textual content. Studying German poetry allows students to appreciate Germany's rich historical and cultural heritage, improve their aesthetic judgment, and enhance their German language skills. Additionally, learning German poetry provides students with a deeper understanding of the development and evolution of German national culture, enabling comparisons with their own culture and fostering intercultural thinking and personal growth.

Goethe's Life and His Significance in German Literature

Goethe is one of the most influential figures in German literary history. Born on August 28, 1749, in Frankfurt, Goethe grew up in an affluent family where his parents had high expectations for him, hiring tutors to teach him subjects, such as Greek, Latin, French, Italian, English, Hebrew, painting, music, fencing, and

horseback riding. Goethe exhibited a passion for creative writing and literary talent from an early age; in 1757, he composed a poem dedicated to his grandmother, which is the earliest of his preserved works. In October 1765, he enrolled at the University of Leipzig to study law but returned home three years later due to illness. He resumed his studies at the University of Strasbourg in March 1770, where he eventually earned a doctorate. During this period, he met Johann Gottfried Herder, whose thoughts deeply influenced Goethe, solidifying his creative direction. Herder once remarked in *German Characteristics and Art*, “With Goethe, a new Shakespeare has arisen”. Before Goethe, no German writer has made such a significant impact on both national and foreign literature.

Goethe’s literary contributions span novels, dramas, and poetry, an exceptional achievement given his ability to excel across these three genres. Goethe’s literary career lasted over 60 years and is often divided into two primary phases: the early Sturm und Drang (Storm and Stress) movement and the later Classical period. Goethe was a central figure of the Sturm und Drang movement, gathering a circle of writers around him in Strasbourg and Frankfurt, commonly known as the “Goethe School”.

Characteristics of Goethe’s Poetry and Classroom Teaching Insights

The significance of Goethe in German literature cannot be overstated, and his works are essential reading in higher education German literature courses. His poetry, in particular, stands out as a brilliant facet of his literary achievements, often expressing themes of freedom, opposition to feudalism, patriotism, admiration for genius, and reflections on life. But how should Goethe’s poetry be taught in the German literature classroom? This can be explored from the perspective of reception aesthetics.

Assigning pre-class tasks to introduce students to Goethe. To understand Goethe’s poetry accurately, students must first know its creator. Understanding Goethe’s life experiences helps them comprehend why he wrote a particular poem and serves to build their “horizon of expectations”, facilitating a deeper understanding of Goethe’s work. For instance, before reading Goethe’s famous poem “Welcome and Departure”, students should learn about Goethe’s life circumstances at the time of its creation and understand that he wrote it as a love poem while still a student. Once students know more about Goethe’s background, they will better appreciate that the poem was written for someone he loved.

Building students’ “Horizon of Expectations” through classroom guidance. Teachers can explore students’ “horizon of expectations” in advance. Since “Welcome and Departure” describes the reunion and separation of lovers, teachers might start by asking questions, such as “What would you do if you missed your girlfriend or boyfriend?” or “How would it feel to reunite and then part from someone you love?” These questions help students establish certain expectations and make them more emotionally attuned to the poet’s feelings.

Classroom exercises to reinforce understanding and application. After studying the poem, teachers can design exercises to reinforce students’ understanding and encourage them to apply phrases from the poem. True mastery of German poetry comes only when students can apply it. For example, after studying Goethe’s “Welcome and Departure”, teachers could have students practice making sentences using classic lines from the poem. Additionally, students could rewrite the lines as dialogue for the male and female characters, simulating Goethe’s emotions. Through Iser’s concept of the “invocation structure”, students can complete the “indeterminacies” within the poem, unleashing their imaginations.

Assigning poetry recitation practice post-class. Through recitation of understood German poems, students will gain a stronger sense of the poem’s rhythmic beauty, resonate with the author’s emotions, and enrich their

own life experiences and aesthetic sensibilities. Teachers could also organize diverse extracurricular activities, such as “Recitation Contests”, “German Poetry Corner”, or a “German Drama Club”, to foster student interest in German literature.

Incorporating Goethe’s poetry into German literature courses under the framework of reception aesthetics can invigorate teaching methods, increase student engagement, and cultivate an appreciation for literature. By integrating author backgrounds before class, guiding teaching activities during class, and promoting poetry recitation post-class, teachers can use the concepts of “horizon of expectations” and “invocation structure” to span the pre-class, in-class, and post-class stages. This approach encourages students to take a proactive role in learning, enhances teacher capabilities, updates teaching materials, and contributes to a sustainable cycle of educational improvement

Conclusion

Applying reception aesthetics to German literature classes in higher education can refresh teaching methods and perspectives, nurturing students’ passion for literature. By introducing author backgrounds before class, guiding teaching during class, and engaging students in poetic recitations after class, teachers can effectively integrate “horizon of expectations” and “invocation structure” concepts across pre-class, in-class, and post-class phases. This fosters proactive learning, enhances teacher competency, updates teaching materials, and forms a virtuous cycle.

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